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ABSTRACT

The first in a series of booklets developed for governing boards, community leaders, group members, administrators, and citizens suggests techniques that can be used to maintain interest and enthusiasm in a group. The point of view taken suggests that for a group to maintain a high level of productivity, it will periodically need to examine itself in three major areas. A group will need to provide for change in membership, it will need to be able to adopt new goals, and it will need to maintain a flexible attitude toward its procedures. The booklets in the series are designed to help group leaders and members strengthen their skills in group processes, work cooperatively with others, and plan and carry out new projects. Topics include techniques to maintain enthusiasm in a group, ways that agencies can effectively use consultants, and factors that affect introducing and implementing new projects. The booklets in the series are adapted from a much more comprehensive set of materials and training activities developed and field tested by the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory over the past several years in dozens of locations throughout the western United States. (Author/MLF)

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Keys to Community Involvement Series

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KEYS TO COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT

COMMUNITY GROUPS: KEEPING THEM ALIVE & WELL

Greg Druian

Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory
Portland, Oregon

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1801 North Moore Street
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ABOUT THE SERIES

Keys to Community Involvement is a series of booklets developed for governing boards, community leaders, group members, administrators and citizens. The booklets are designed to help these audiences strengthen their skills in group processes, work cooperatively with others, and plan and carry out new projects. Topics include techniques to maintain enthusiasm in a group, ways that agencies can effectively use consultants, and factors that affect introducing and implementing new projects.

The booklets are written by members of the Rural Education Program of the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory. The Laboratory is a nonprofit, educational research and development corporation, headquartered in Portland, Oregon.

The booklets in the series are adapted from a much more comprehensive set of materials and training activities developed and field tested by the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory over the past several years in dozens of locations throughout the western United States.

Information about other booklets in this series--titles and how to order--as well as information about related services--training, workshops and consultation--can be found on the inside and outside back covers of this booklet.

This booklet consists of a text and worksheets that you may use with your group. The worksheets appear at the back of the booklet so that you may copy them to use with your group.

INTRODUCTION

This booklet is written for chairpersons, facilitators, and conveners who meet regularly with citizen groups. Its purpose is to suggest some techniques that can be used to maintain interest and enthusiasm in a group. Often when a group has been meeting over a period of six months to a year, the initial commitment on the part of group members wanes, which is to be expected. As soon as an enterprise loses its novelty, people's interest tends to lag. Or when a group successfully completes a very difficult task, it may seem hard to motivate the group to a new task. The techniques suggested in this booklet have been used to help groups through their slow periods, but they may require some adjustment to be useful in your situation. So while this is an idea booklet, containing many procedural suggestions, it needs your imagination to be really successful.

OVERVIEW

The contents of this booklet are arranged into three parts, based on the assumption that there are three ways in which a group can revitalize itself:

1. A group can become a new group by changing its membership.

2. A group can change or clarify the goals towards which it is working.

3. A group can change or clarify the procedures it uses to get its work done.*

CHANGING MEMBERSHIP

Citizens' groups are made up of busy, energetic people. But even if energetic people stay with a single task too long, they can become frustrated or lose interest. It is almost always a good idea to come to an understanding with group members about how long they will be expected to serve. Will it be one year? Two? Six months? Try to choose a length of time that is appropriate to the purpose of the group. For example, a group working with the schools may choose a 9-month term, coinciding with the school year.

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* There are several booklets on the market that deal with holding successful meetings. One of the best is Taking Your Meetings Out of the Doldrums, by Eva Schindler-Rainman, Ron Lippitt and Jack Cole. It is available from The Association of Professional YMCA Directors, 40 W. Long Street, Columbus, Ohio 43215 at a cost of $4.75 per copy.

It is common, too, to find that the changing nature of group tasks will bring about situations in which group members will not feel that they are the appropriate persons to be doing the task at hand. Or perhaps non-group members will want to participate. In these cases, a group needs to decide what its membership should be. Typically, questions of membership are answered by naming *persons* who should, in someone's opinion, be in the group. But a more balanced group will result if a group asks itself the question, *"What parts of our community should be represented in this group?"*

When this question is asked, you can assist the group in using an Opinion Leader Survey technique to help it achieve a more satisfactory membership. (*Worksheet #1*, found at the back of this booklet, is designed to be used with this technique.) The opinion leader survey employs the following steps:

1. Identify the formal and informal groups in your community or neighborhood.

2. Determine how many representatives each formal and informal group should have in the group.

3. Plan a means of surveying each formal and informal group to determine who the trusted representatives would be.

4. Invite the persons nominated in Step #3 to serve as group members.

A sample portion of an opinion leader survey is shown on the following page.

WORKSHEET #1

Opinion Leader Survey

Riverdale School Community Action Group

1. Identify the formal and informal groups who should be represented in this group.

INFORMAL		FORMAL	
a. *persons under 25*	1	a. *PTA*	1
b. *persons over 60*	1	b. *School Board*	1
c. *low income families*	2	c. *Teachers rep.*	1
d. *workers at the plant*	1	d. *Student Body (H.S.)*	1
e. *families with school-age children*	3	e. *Kiwanis Club*	1
f. *students with problems*	1	f. *Chamber of Commerce*	1
g.		g.	

2. In the space provided next to each group listed, list how many representatives each group should have.

3. Use a form, such as the one printed below, to survey each group to determine the opinion leaders

We are looking for persons to serve on the *SCAG*, and it is important that your group be represented. Please list three persons who you think would be opinion leaders of the *Kiwanis Club*.
(fill in with name of informal/formal group)

a. They have demonstrated an interest in the group's work.

b. They have done something new or different in their line of work.

c. They are the kinds of persons you would listen to and believe.

First Choice *Gilbert Johnson*

Second Choice *Emmett Rogers*

Third Choice _____

Figure 1: Sample Opinion Leader Survey

Sometimes a group will not see a need for altering its membership, but will have no energy for a necessary task or subtask. In these cases, you can help the group invite a task force from the community to carry out the task. Task forces should be given an opportunity to become thoroughly acquainted with the task and goals of the larger group. Indeed, as the group carries out the new task of orienting the task force, it may gain motivation simply because it is doing something new.

CHANGING OR CLARIFYING GOALS

Another common cause of a group losing its sense of direction is that its goals may be either stale or unclear. If a group has been working on one problem or type of problem for several months, the situation can develop where people are saying, "We're just doing the same thing over and over again." This rut can be avoided by actively soliciting new ideas about the purpose of the group. For example, a group may have been active in planning and constructing a new playground for children. You can help the group grow in value to the community by:

1. *Suggesting new directions.* Your role is to make sure that the group realizes it's OK to expand its horizons. The group in the example might choose to become active in locating parent volunteers to assist in after-school playground activities, or it may choose to expand its efforts in the area of community development. You may need to lay the groundwork for new kinds of activities by building bridges between your group and other agencies, such as school boards and other community agencies and groups.

2. You can assist the group in *setting up a task force to recommend new goals for the group.* This task force might contact existing agencies in the community to explore ways of assisting these agencies.

3. If a group has a series of goals, and has not been working on low priority goals, you might suggest it *reprioritize its already existing goals.*

4. You can assist the group in *surveying the community to determine new goals.*

5. You can use a technique such as the following to *elicit new goals from group members:*

   a. Distribute to each group member a paragraph such as the following and ask him or her to complete it individually.

      "It is three years in the future and after an extended absence you are now back in the community. You are immediately struck with how well things are going. You notice that this group has had a powerful and positive impact on the community. You notice especially that it is doing a lot of things it was not doing before. The things you see going on are. . . ."

   b. Select a recorder, and ask group members to read, in turn, things they have written down. The recorder writes the ideas on newsprint as each group member reads.

   c. Prioritize what appears on newsprint. Criteria for prioritization may include such things as cost, feasibility, clarity of idea, importance to the community, etc. A simple chart like the one on the following page may make this go smoothly.

Riverdale School Community Action Group

Criteria:	Suggestions: Set Up Day Care Center	Conduct Survey for Community Development Needs	Become Involved With School Activities
1. Available People-Power	3	4	4
2. Wide interest	3	2	5
3. Doesn't conflict with other groups	5	3	5
TOTALS	11	9	14

Figure 2: Sample Prioritization of Group Suggestions for New Goals

In this chart, each suggestion is ranked on a scale of 1-5 (1 = low, 5 = high) for each criterion. Totals are tallied vertically. The suggestions with the highest totals may be selected for further action.

The problem of unclear goals is somewhat more difficult. In order for a group to make progress, it is essential that a common understanding of its goals, or "reason for being," is shared among the membership. The problem is compounded by the fact that often group members will act as if they understand the goal and will not reveal any confusion they may have. No one wants to feel as if he or she is the only one who isn't with it.

As a group facilitator, you need information about member understanding of the group goals. One way you can gain such information is to ask individuals on your own.

The problem with this technique is that you may not be able to contact everyone. Another way is to observe how the group is operating and try to draw conclusions from what you observe. A more reliable technique is to arrange for time on the agenda to ask each person to state or to write down what he or she thinks that the goals of the group are.

With a new group, it will sometimes be very difficult to win agreement as to what the group's goals ought to be. It may be that only after the group has worked together for a while, will it understand its own goals. With an ongoing group if it appears that there is misunderstanding, you might achieve more clarity by asking the group to describe in specific terms what will be going on if the goal is met. For example, if the group thinks it would like to establish an after school program, you might ask who the after school program would be designed to serve, or how many classes will be provided in the program. If the goal is to increase group membership, you might ask how many new members would satisfy the group.

CHANGING OR CLARIFYING PROCEDURES

The area of procedures is a large one, and no pretense is made in this booklet to cover the entire area. Three areas that groups often overlook will be suggested, however, in which a group might change its procedures so as to improve productivity.

1. Procedures: The Agenda

   Common difficulties caused by agendas are: failure to specify the suggested or planned time for each item on the agenda; and failure to specify the kind of action needed by the group. If these two points are attended to the group is "cued" as to the type and duration of participation that is expected and needed, and much potential confusion is alleviated.

AGENDA

Riverdale School Community Action Group

	Item	Time	Action
1.	Welcome, agenda review	7:00 - 7:15	Information sharing
2.	Read minutes from last meeting	7:15 - 7:20	Information sharing
3.	Select new chairperson	7:20 - 7:45	Decision
4.	Hear Task Force Report	7:45 - 8:00	Decision to adopt or not adopt

Figure 3: Sample Agenda

2. Procedures: Introducing Variety

Even though citizens' groups see themselves as "task-oriented," variety and flexibility are needed by any group. If it seems that meetings are held only because it's "the second Tuesday of the month," or if meetings take place at the same location only out of habit, or if each agenda looks like the last, or if the same people seem to be doing the same things, it may be time to change.

Perhaps someone would like to hold a meeting in his or her home, or perhaps the group would like to combine a meeting with a social occasion. Maybe some of the "information" items on an agenda

that typically produce low involvement can be covered in a different way, such as in a newsletter, or by posting the information in the meeting room for people to read before the meeting or during the breaks.

Finally, perhaps roles, such as chairperson, convener, recorder, task force spokesperson and so forth, can be rotated, yielding the double advantage that uninvolved persons have an opportunity for greater involvement, and that the burdens of responsibility for the group are more equally shared.

3. Procedures: Group Climate

An important procedural area that is often neglected in the press of business is the area of group climate. Group climate refers to the "atmosphere" within which the group does its work. Often this atmosphere affects a group's productivity, even though group members may not initially realize it. As a group leader, you can do several things to find out how members feel about group climate. Once this information is known, imaginative suggestions of group members can be brought to bear to solve problems.

You might, for example, construct simple meeting evaluation forms. *Worksheet #2*, at the back of the booklet, shows two examples. As a rule, however, you should use only one evaluation form at each meeting. Summaries of data from forms like these can be fed back to the group at a specific time on the agenda.

When a volunteer group member assumes the task of compiling and reporting meeting evaluation data, the advantages of introducing a new role for group members make themselves felt. Another technique

you may use is to appoint yourself or another group member as a "Process Observer." Process observation is simply observing a group to determine whether there are any roadblocks to the accomplishment of tasks. It is suggested that the person conducting the meeting not be the observer. A simple procedure* for observing a group is:

a. Before the meeting, list two or three (it is important for the sake of manageability to limit yourself) of the most important things the group will be doing if the meeting goes well.

b. As the meeting proceeds, each time you see evidence of one of the things you listed, write down a few words to remind yourself of the occasion.

c. When requested, report the information you gathered to the group. This procedure works best if you do not attempt to interpret the information you have gathered; let the group interpret it. As follow up, the group may wish to suggest changes that will help it better do its work.

A sample appears on the following page:

* This procedure is reproduced in *Worksheet #3* at the back of this booklet.

(1) List two or three of the most important things the group will be doing if the meeting goes well:

a) Group members will participate equally

b) Group members will feel good about the meeting

(2) In the space below, each time you see evidence of one of the things listed, write down a few words to remind you of it.

a) Participation		b) Feelings about the meeting
Mary IIII	Ed C. III	"This is going well"
Roger II	Ed R.	"I'm really excited about this"
Sam III	Jane IIII	4 persons volunteered for tasks
Wilma I		

Figure 4: Sample Process Observation Form

SUMMARY

The point of view taken in this booklet suggests that in order for a group to maintain a high level of productivity, it will periodically need to examine itself in three major areas. A group will need to provide for changing membership, it will need to be able to adopt new goals and it will need to maintain a flexible attitude towards its procedures. As pointed out in this booklet, there are some simple things you can do to help a group in these areas. But there is no substitute for actively engaging a group in the solution of its own problems, using the initiative and imagination of group members themselves.

WORKSHEET #1

Opinion Leader Survey

1. Identify the formal and informal groups who should be represented in this group.

INFORMAL		FORMAL	
a.	____	a.	____
b.	____	b.	____
c.	____	c.	____
d.	____	d.	____
e.	____	e.	____
f.	____	f.	____
g.	____	g.	____

2. In the space provided next to each group listed, list how many representatives each group should have.

WORKSHEET #1 Continued

3. Use a form, such as the one printed below, to survey each group to determine the opinion leaders.

We are looking for persons to serve on the _____, and it is important that your group be represented. Please list three persons who you think would be opinion leaders of the _____ because:
(fill in with name of informal/formal group)

a.* They have demonstrated an interest in the group's work.

b. They have done something new or different in their line of work.

c. They are the kinds of persons you would listen to and believe.

First Choice_____

Second Choice_ _____

Third Choice_____

*The qualities of an opinion leader as listed here represent only a sample. You may wish to have your group decide for itself what the qualities of an opinion leader are. These qualities would then be listed in place of the ones in the sample.

WORKSHEET #2

Sample Meeting Evaluation Forms

Form A

Please list the three things you thought went best during the meeting:

1)

2)

3)

Now, please list the three things you think should be improved in order that the next meeting is even better:

1)

2)

3)

Form B

Please check the number that most nearly describes your own feelings:

1) On the whole, the way I feel about what went on during the meeting is

1	2	3	4	5
Very Unsatisfied	Generally Unsatisfied	OK	Generally Satisfied	Completely Satisfied

2) On the whole, the way we work together is

1	2	3	4	5
Very Unsatisfactory	Generally Unsatisfactory	OK	Generally Satisfactory	Completely Satisfactory

3) My own participation is

1	2	3	4	5
Very Unsatisfactory To Me	Generally Unsatisfactory To Me	OK	Generally Satisfactory To Me	Completely Satisfactory To Me

Please add any comments you may have about your responses, or other concerns:

WORKSHEET #3

Process Observation

1. List two or three of the most important things the group will be doing if the meeting goes well.

2. In the space below, each time you see evidence of one of the things you listed, write down a few words to remind you of it.

You can vary this procedure by looking at one of several categories of things for Step 1 above. For example, you can limit yourself to the category of "Communication," and list two or three things that will be happening if there is good communication. Other possible categories are: Decision Making, Task Accomplishment, Cooperation, Staying on Time, Participation, and Effectiveness. You can probably add several more to this list.

If the duties of your position call for communicating with the public or others in the field of education, NSPRA membership is a must for you. Current members include superintendents, assistant superintendents, community/public relations specialists, principals, classroom teachers, college professors and students.

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